

Stress and Mental Health in the Newcomer Child

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We all experience stress from time to time, but too much stress can have negative consequences. For both children and adults, excessive stress can interfere with daily routines and activities and can cause emotional struggles. This can be difficult for adults to handle, but it is even harder for children, who may not yet be able to identify all of their emotions, let alone cope with them.

Newcomer children are adapting to a new environment, new sights, sounds, foods and people. On top of this, they are learning to understand a new language. All of this can lead to stress, and can present as physical, emotional and intellectual changes. By learning to recognize the signs of stress and helping newcomer children to build their resiliency, you can assist them in coping with life's challenges today and into the future.

How to Recognize Stress in Newcomer Children

A change in behaviour is usually the first sign of difficulty. Look for:

- Whining, clinging, poor listening, biting, kicking, crying
- Hair pulling/twisting, thumb sucking, daydreaming
- Fighting with peers and family
- Becoming restless, impulsive and/or cautious
- Poor concentration, lack of appetite or excessive eating
- Frustration, sadness, oversensitivity
- Becoming forgetful, showing poor concentration, being easily distracted.

8 Strategies for Helping Newcomer Children to Cope With Stress

The following strategies may help newcomer children to cope with stress:

1. Give them tools to communicate their emotions:
Show labeled pictures of children experiencing different emotions. You can then have the child point to the emotion they are experiencing. Teaching a child about emotions through the use



of pictures or various visual tools will also help to increase their knowledge of English.

2. Build relaxation time into your program:
A quiet time or a short exercise opportunity, such as children's yoga, can help to alleviate stress.
3. Offer them activity choices:
When a child makes a choice about which of two activities they would like to do, it empowers them to feel confident and encourages them to be purposefully engaged in their daily activities.
4. Give a child your full attention and understanding when they make attempts to communicate:
This helps to build trust, which is essential to good mental health.
5. Provide familiar materials, and demonstrate how to use new ones:
Children may not be familiar with new foods, utensils, self feeding, toys, art materials, books or sensory play. By demonstrating how to use new items or do new things, you will help to increase children's comfort levels. It is also helpful to use materials that will be familiar to most children. Natural play materials are especially comforting. For example, put dirt, water and rocks in the sandbox.
6. Monitor the use of music in your child care program:
Avoid having music on all the time. Children learning a new language need to hear the sounds and words that their teachers and peers use to communicate.
7. Enhance the sensory materials in your environment:
Use a variety of textures in all areas. Have a small pillow or soft blanket available for when children need a break from the busy classroom. Use different mats (such as placemats) under Play-doh or crayon activities.
8. Provide options for story time:
Have a number of different options available for quiet stories and for more active stories. Record the children telling stories or record a story in your own voice for a child to listen to using headphones.

Remember that each child is unique!

Using the strategies above, you can increase resiliency in young children by creating a positive, flexible learning environment. Still, it's important to keep in mind that individual temperaments must be considered. Many newcomer children may need six months to adjust to their new environment, while others may need even longer.

